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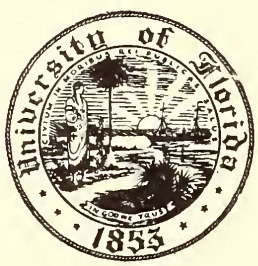

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Weather and Season

By the same author

POETRY

Flowering Cactus
Poems 1950–1951
The Dual Site

CRITICISM

Reason and Energy

TRANSLATIONS

Poems of Hölderlin
Baudelaire: 20 Prose Poems
Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations
Hofmannsthal: Poems and Verse Plays (U.S.A.)
Hofmannsthal: Dramatic Works (U.S.A.)
Modern German Poetry 1910–1960, with Christopher Middleton

Michael Hamburger

WEATHER AND SEASON

New Poems

Atheneum
NEW YORK
1963

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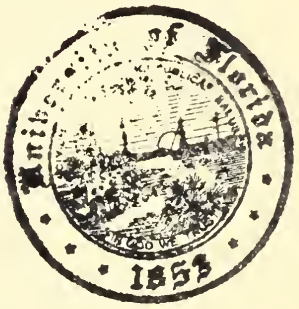

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Part 1

Homage to the Weather

A tide, high tide of golden air.

Where, till this moment, were the bees?
And when no hum made for the honeysuckle,
Fumbled,
Became a body,
Clung and drank,
Spindrift, disowned, the petals hung,
And wait, let go was what the summer meant.

A corner of the garden, ivy on broken slats,
A branch with orange puffs: buddleia globosa.
Between two gusts a flood of golden air,
Mere hush, perhaps, abeyance – but the bees
Clinging and drinking.

Walls they brought with them: black courtyard
in Paris,
A bit of marble, tumbled, dust on leaves,
A goldfish pond, the traffic not remote,
Audible, yet excluded;
Flowering tree or shrub in any weathered city,
Walls to contain a quietness, a quiver,
Fulfilment of the year, bees to be stilled.

Between two gusts, cold waves, the golden tide.

Tides

To wake without fail when milk bottles shake in
their racks,
Scrape one's face in the morning, every morning,
Take the same route to work and say 'good morning'
To the same row of scraped or powdered faces –
I cursed the roundness of this earth, I raged
At every self-perpetuating motion,
Hated the sea, that basher of dumb rock,
For all her factory of weeds and fishes,
The thumps, the thuds, the great reverberations –
Too much in rhythm; jarring, but by rote.

The metronome it was in my own head
That ticked and ticked; caged cricket in my head
That chirped and chirped until I had no ear
For syncopation, counterpoint of stillness
Beating against all music – of the sea,
Of birds and men, of season and machine,
Even of cricket and of metronome.
In silence I learned to listen; in the dark to look.

And unrepeatable now each morning's light
Modulates, shuffles, probes the daily faces
Often too suddenly different, like the street,
This weathered wall re-pointed, that new one cracked,
Apple trees that I prune while I forget
The shape of last year's boughs, cankered or grown,
And where that stump is, one that died in blossom;
Forget the hill's curve under the aerial masts.

No, wheels, grind on; seasons, repeat yourselves;
Milk bottles, rattle; familiars, gabble 'good morning';
Breed, hatch, digest your weeds and fishes, sea,
Omit no beat, nor rise to tidal waves.
Various enough the silences cut in
Between the rock cave's boom and the small
    wader's cry.

In a Convex Mirror

A stately room – chaise-longue and easy chairs,
Old jugs on carved commodes, a clavichord,
Three landscapes, minor eighteenth century,
Against the pale grey walls; and all in half-light,
The street being narrow, the houses opposite tall,
Each with a room like this – a waiting-room.

Sunk in a chair, quite still, a waiting man
Who stares into a classic composition
Heavily framed above the mantelpiece.
A streak of grey, myself in miniature
Against pale pink upholstery, exhales
Invisible smoke; and slowly moves one hand,
Ten minutes only here, half lost already,
Half vanquished by the furniture, half absorbed,
But for the ticking of a clock would yield
All his defences, call the blur delusion.

But 'trumpery' now I mutter, jump up to break it,
Command my legs to walk, jerk my glazed eyes
Out of this glazed anachronism's eye,
And hear my name called; going, look once more:

A classic composition; nothing stirs.
One little streak of grey that matched the walls
Removed, but in that half-light far too faint
To leave a gap, and soon to be replaced.

The Body

Blue sky. White sand the wavelets lick and leave.
Alone his body struts, alone lies down.
Spiced with what springs, tautened in what tart winters,
It crouched and ran and leapt and climbed and hung,
Pulled at the oar, to exquisite horsebacks clung,
Rippled and swelled and sweated, flew on skis,
Braved currents, breakers, basked on how many shores.
The fruits and wines of every region fed it,
Beasts, wildfowl, fishes and more curious fauna
Its narrow bulk displaced. To the best winds it went,
Now noon, now morning sun for blending of its colour,
Now high, now low for cordials of air.

None stalks it now to win or to admire,
Nor yet to kill. Of its own prime it dies
Where still he waits for her who in one glance will gather
Those foods, exertions, weathers, distances,
In his true landscape recognize her lover,
Each dear perfection answered in her eye.
Night took them all; smothers indifferently
Flesh of whatever tint, complexion, shape,
Abetting not the goddess but the woman,
Carnivorous mind more lithe than ever body was
In turning alien substances to gain;
Love, the sole acrobat, all limb and maw.

The sun's eye dims. No eye but his looks there.
A blotted contour, cold, his body struts
On greyish sand the wavelets lick and leave.

A Horse's Eye

I did not stop today at the five-barred gate,
Did not wait for the old white draught-horse at grass,
Unshod, unharnessed these many years; walked past,
Preoccupied, but something made me look back:
Her head was over the gate, her neck was straight,
But I caught her eye, a wicked, reproachful look
From one small eye slanted in my direction.
What right, I defied the old mare, what right had she
To expect caresses, the grass foolishly plucked
For her hanging lip, her yellow, broken teeth
And her great historical belly? Of course she's a relic,
Curious now as the old white country house
That stood empty and alluring in the wood behind her
Till converted into flats – not as useless as she,
Who will never become a tractor! What farmer would care?
Only some town-bred, animist, anthropomorphic rambler
Or week-end motorist looking for what he's lost.

I walked on; but plainly her glance had spoken to me,
As an old peasant's might in a foreign country,
Communicating neither words nor thought, but the knowledge
Of flesh that has suffered labour in rain and wind,
Fed, relaxed, enjoyed and opposed every season.
Broken now. Close to death. And how differently broken
From that Cossack mare the clumsiest rider could sit,
All speed and nerve and power that somehow responded
To the faintest twitch of a will less tense than her own!
Wild nature still; her eye no peasant's eye,
But lava under glass, tellurian fire contained.

As for the old white mare, her reproach was just:
Because she was too intelligible I had passed her by,
Because not alien enough, but broken as men are broken,
Because the old white house was converted now,
The wood about to be felled, a tractor chugging
Beyond the hill, and awkwardly she trotted
On legs too thin for her belly bloated with age,
Alone in her meadow, at grass, and close to death.

Arctic Explorer

Whether dog will eat dog, likes boot leather frozen or boiled,
Whether walrus will prey on whale – the white or the grey? –
Or only on seal – the bearded or common? –
And is able in time to digest the clam swallowed whole;
Whether man can eat dog that has eaten the poisonous liver
Of polar bear, and wake up to indulge in a salad
Of sorrel and purple saxifrage after a breakfast of auks:
These were a few of the questions which if he did not answer
He probed as far as he could with his naked senses,
Knife-blade, bullet, harpoon, and the pain that probed him.
Fossils too he brought back and notes anthropologists noted –
The Eskimo's fear not of narwhal but bumble bee –
Temperature charts and rough maps of the nameless mountains,
Cures for frostbite and skills never dreamed of at home,
Never called for either, never again to be used.

Brought back the knowledge that all his knowledge was loss;
And worse than loss, betrayal. Of musk-ox, of eiderduck?
Of gentle Eskimo, soon to be anyone's game?
Them and more. Of the hard land unlocked by his loving
To procure for the pimps of empire another whore.
And wished he had brought back nothing, not even his body,
Left it to wolf or to fox, to the poppies' ravenous roots
Or only glacier and silence, the diamond moonlight in winter.
Stayed there, died there in the first hard act.
Greater cold now he longed for, wider, more blizzard-swept
skylines
For ever receding, crevasses more cunningly opening
And blindness the consummate vision, white, white to the
point of blue,
Ice in his veins, and the snowlight burning to ice in his head.

Bird Watcher

Challenged, he'd say it was a mode of knowing –
As boys in railway stations neutralize a passion
By gathering ciphers: number, date and place –
Yet keeps no record of his rare encounters,
Darkly aware that like his opposite
Who no less deep in woods, as far out on the moors
Makes do with food and trophies, hunts for easy favours,
He trysts defeat by what he cannot know.

'Goldfinch' he says, and means a chirping flutter
From stalk to stalk in early autumn meadows,
Or 'oystercatcher', meaning a high, thin cry
More ghost than bodied voice, articulation
Of the last rock's complaint against the sea.

And wooing with his mind the winter fieldfares
Has made a snare of his binoculars,
For lime and cage and gun has longed in secret,
To kill that he may count, ravish despair
And eat the tongue that will not speak to him,
Though to the wind it speaks, evasive as the wind.

He grows no lighter, they no heavier
As to his mode of loving he returns,
Fixed in the discipline of adoration;
Will keep no pigeons, nor be satisfied
With metropolitan starlings garbling their parodies.

The boy's cold bride will yield, too soon and utterly,
Never these engines fuelled with warm blood,
Graced with peculiar folly that will far outfly him
Till in one communal emptiness they meet.

Old Woman

She seems to drift, but talks against the current,
Observes a daffodil on the present bank
But strains toward its double of another spring
Not truly seen when seeing was too easy,
Her will less flexed against the drowsiness
Of dragging limbs, so near now to the sea,
With all the weight of eighty-six years to keep
From sleep that would be drowning.
So late she dare not drift, her work unfinished
As when a servant girl denied her sleep
To show the guests out, clear the table, polish
The silver cutlery, she dared not rest
Till almost night and morning drudgery met,
The silence was perfection.
And even now it's tidying keeps her up –
To talk her dead alive, sharp-tongued, cut through
Crust after crust of dirty circumstance
To set one legend free –
His whom by self-negation she upheld
Till the cold killers drove him from her tending
And out of memory,
Beyond her ken and kinship, wrenched his face.
Round, round she seems to whirl; but making, mending,
Laboriously retraces
A broken circle, his blurred lineaments;
Laughs as he laughed, and curses as he cursed
That she may come at last to where his voice gave out
Too soon, in the absurdity of death,
Smile as he smiled there, but less bitterly,
And, her work done, be still.

Blind Man

He can hear the owl's flight in daylight
When, surprised, on silky wings it shoots
From a low perch; and by the open window at night
The stag-beetles blundering in the hedges
On the far side of the meadow. Geese half a mile away
Honk near as hooters of swerving cars
And do not alarm him. Indifferently he awaits
Dogs that he feared when they slunk or bounded
Visible at him, as if in his carapace
Of darkness for ever secure from harm,
Wombed and housed and coffined within a wound
That has hardened to armour. The screech and the hum
Blend and subside in a resonant quiet,
Shapes he has fumbled to feel fall back
Into unbroken space when his hands forget them,
And still are present in his no man's land;
Above the nightmare tamed by light's extinction
The apple that hangs unplucked, grown fabulous.

Man of the World

Strange, but he cheats his master
Who without fail or stint pays in good notes and coinage,
For ever seeking to convert that currency
Into the sleep of metals and of stone.
Malachite, agate, lapis lazuli
Weigh down his papers; his eyelids are heavy with sleep.
Not bonds, not journals, line his inmost walls
But rows of books, his graveyard of choice minds,
Asleep until he rouses them,
Images fixed on paper, canvas, wood,
The disc engraved with voices of the dead,
Not flesh or leaf, time's pasture, but porcelain, ivory, bone.

Sleep is his wages; hatred of sleep
And fear of what might break it,
Sickness or slump,
The clumsy servant's duster,
Instruments of the retribution that will shatter
All that belies his means, outlasts his ends –
His master's ends, not his:
Though on a nightmare's back, he gallops into truth,
Though but to crash or stumble, rid of the glazed disasters
That were his juggler's toys,
Feel the raw grain and jagged crust of earth
And wake to serve his master loyally.

Variations on an Infant Theme

For Richard

I

'I love you and I love me' –
So you chanted at the age of three,
Happily truthful then
And effortlessly wise
As never you'll be again
Till, one more graduate in the school of lies,
You choose the dangerous descent
More difficult by far
Than the same way when, guided, roped, cajoled
To every known foothold,
One of a crowd you climbed, and lay content
Not with yourself – loving not what you are
But what they were and deigned to let you be,
Gathered into their own self-flattery.
On ledge and peak beware
Of too delicious air,
Dazzle of quartz light, glitter in the scree.
Though by negation now you will progress,
Chasms of loneliness,
The terror that in one fall
You will lose all
And, shattering, disprove
That ever your self's mirror held the shapes you love,
Go down, go down, my son,
Back to your starting-place –
Sheer on the sheer rock face,
Bare mind in world's embrace,
Your pride and your conquests undone.

II

Hazy you'll leave the hut where climbers eat and sleep,
With fingers half awake at first will clutch
Dream rock, real rock, only to rest again
On the bare boards, self-love, the bed of all your loves,
Base of your search for vistas or alpine flowers,
Whatever phantoms inwardly you collect.
Love makes you real, makes real the ghost of flowers
And flesh that would be ghostly but for love.

Guessed in the dark or limmed in naked sunlight,
All, all can vanish though you climb no more,
Fences, walls are in good repair and your thoughts
Only on dwelling dwell now, possessed by possession.
To night oppose night, or dawn may catch you staring
At a garden suddenly withered, leafless in June,
Your pasture land for ever veiled in mist;
The bolt you slide into place have nothing to guard
But its own echo subsiding in an empty house.

III

'I love you and I love me'
What in yourself you are will be
Your outer journey's map and paradigm;
Only what in yourself you love
Grow as you grow, move as you move.
Out-climbing self, the loved one you'll out-climb;
Too long at rest, her limbs immobilize;
Purblind, will read your blankness in her eyes.
Self-centred is the light by which you see,
That makes you real, and real reality,
Ripens your crops and measures out your time:
All seasons and all weathers may that light approve.

Conformist

Branded in childhood, for thirty years he strove
To hide the scar, and truly to believe
In the true fundaments of that commonweal
Which once had outlawed him beyond repeal,
And with true awe, true gratitude, true love
Would gaze upon the incorruptible guard
Before the gate – the keeper of his peace
Who in mean streets could live anonymous . . .

Until conformity brought its reward:
A crested, gilt-edged card. The great gate opened,
A pair of stiff lips cracked and let him pass
Into those halls his half life's dreams had deepened;

And out again . . . to breathe the ownerless air,
Night sky transfigured, lucent, fresh and clear
After the ceilings puffed in emulation.
His own place found at last; his own self found –
Outside, outside – his heritage regained
By grace of exile, of expropriation.

What had he seen, ushered behind the gate?
The dress and furniture of his own terrors,
A glittering medal pinned on his own wound,
And, at the heart, an empty hall of mirrors.

Healed now, of health, unmasked, of honesty,
In, out again he passed, with one smile met
The questioning eyes of flunkey, potentate,
Townsman and guard shrunk to complicity,

All one to him at one with every station
Since none was his, nor ever now could be;
Come late into the freedom his from birth,
To breathe the air, and walk the ownerless earth.

Part 2

In a Cold Season

I

Words cannot reach him in his prison of words
Whose words killed men because those men were words
Women and children who to him were numbers
And still are numbers though reiterated
Launched into air to circle out of hearing
And drop unseen, their metal shells not broken.
Words cannot reach him though I spend more words
On words reporting words reiterated
When in his cage of words he answered words
That told how with his his words he murdered men
Women and children who were words and numbers
And he remembered or could not remember
The words and numbers they reiterated
To trap in words the man who killed with words.
Words cannot reach the children, women, men
Who were not words or numbers till they died
Because ice-packed in terror shrunk minds clung
To numbers words that did not sob or whimper
As children do when packed in trucks to die
That did not die two deaths as mothers do
Who see their children packed in trucks to die.

II

Yet, Muse of the IN-trays, OUT-trays,
Shall he be left uncelebrated
For lack of resonant numbers calculated
To denote your hero, and our abstract age?
Rather in the appropriate vocabulary
Let a memorandum now be drawn up –

Carbon copies to all whom it may concern –
A monument in kind, a testimonial
To be filed for further reference
And to circulate as required.
Adolf Eichmann, civil servant (retired):
A mild man, meticulous in his ways,
As distinctly averse to violence
As to all other irregularities
Perpetrated in his presence,
Rudeness of speech or deportment,
Infringements of etiquette
Or downright incompetence, the gravest offence;
With a head for figures, a stable family life,
No abnormalities.
Never lost his temper on duty
Even with subordinates, even with elements earmarked
For liquidation;
Never once guilty of exceeding his authority
But careful always to confine his ambitions
Within the limits laid down for personnel of his grade.
Never, of course, a maker of policy,
But in its implementation at office level,
Down to the detailed directive, completely reliable;
Never, perhaps, indispensable,
Yet difficult to replace
Once he had mastered the formalities
Of his particular department
And familiarized himself with his responsibilities
As a specialist in the organization
Of the transport and disposal of human material –
In short, an exemplary career.

III

Words words his words – and half his truth perhaps
If blinking, numb in moonlight and astray
A man can map the landmarks trace the shapes
That may be mountains icebergs or his tears
And he whose only zeal was to convert
Real women children men to words and numbers
Added to be subtracted leaving nothing
But aggregates and multiples of nothing
Can know what made him adept in not knowing
Feel what it was he could not would not feel –
And caged in words between their death his death
No place no time for memory to unfreeze
The single face that would bely his words
The single cry that proved his numbers wrong.

Probing his words with their words my words fail.
Cold cold with words I cannot break the shell
And almost dare not lest his whole truth be
To have no core but unreality.

IV

I heard no cry, nor saw her dying face,
Have never known the place, the day,
Whether by bullet, gas or deprivation
They finished her off who was old and ill enough
To die before long in her own good time;
Only that when they came to march her out of her
human world,
Creaking leather couch, mementoes, widow's urn,
They made her write a postcard to her son in England,
'Am going on a journey'; and that all those years
She had refused to travel even to save her life.

Too little I know of her life, her death,
Forget my last visit to her at the age of nine,
The goodbye like any other that was the last,
Only recall that she, mother of five, grandmother,
Freely could share with a child all her little realm;
Recall her lapdog who trembled and snapped up cheese –
Did they kill her lapdog also, or drive him away? –
And the bigger dog before that, a French bulldog, stuffed
To keep her company still after his early death.
Three goldfishes I recall, one with a hump on his back
That lived for years though daily she brushed her fishes
Under the kitchen tap to keep them healthy and clean;
And how she conspired with us children,
Bribed us with sweets if we promised not to tell
Our father that she, who was diabetic,
Kept a pillbox of sweets in her handbag
To eat like a child in secret –
When neither could guess that sweets would not cause
her death.
A wireless set with earphones was part of the magic
She commanded and freely dispensed,
Being childlike herself and guileless and wise . . .

Too little I know of her wisdom, her life,
Only that, guileless, she died deprived
Of her lapdog even, stuffed bulldog and pillbox
of sweets.

v

And yet and yet I would not have him die
Caged in his words their words – one deadly word
Setting the seal on unreality
Adding one number to the millions dead
Subtracting nothing from death dividing nothing

Silencing him who murdered words with words
Not one shell broken, not one word made flesh.
Nor in my hatred would imprison him
Who never free in fear and hatred served
Another's hatred which again was fear
So little life in him he dared not pity
Or if he pitied dared not act on pity;
But show him pity now for pity's sake
And for their sake who died for lack of pity;
Break from the husk at last one naked grain
That still may grow where the massed carrion lay
Bones piled on bones their only mourners bones
The inconceivable aggregate of the dead
Beyond all power to mourn or to avenge;
See man in him spare woman child in him
Though in the end he neither saw nor spared –
Peel off the husk for once and heed the grain,
Plant it though he sowed nothing poisoned growth;
Dare break one word and words may yet be whole.

Part 3

The Moment

Trapped in the whorls of a conch time roared.
Eye, mind met walls,
Could neither enter nor rebound,
The moment lost in plotting for the act.

Sleep cracked the shell,
In lidded eyes unlocked the cells of light,
Undid no knot long fingered,
Traced no new shape, nor any sign but this:

Morning, the slanted beams
Through low dark boughs and the bunched leaves
of bushes.
A streak of lawn illumined? Yet
It was not grass or grain of wood and leaf
That held the moment whole. It was the angle:
Sunlight, and how it fell.

Instead of a Journey

Turn like a top; spin on your dusty axis
Till the bright metal shines again, your head
Hums and the earth accelerates,
Dizzy you drop
Into this easy chair you drowse in daily.
Sit there and watch the walls assume their meaning,
The Chinese plate assert its blue design,
The room renew itself as you grow still.
Then, after your flight and fall, walk to the garden
Or at the open window taste return:
Weather and season, clouds at your vision's rim,
Love's whims, love's habitation, and the heart
By one slow wheel worn down, whetted to gladness.

Quince and Blackthorn

Trunk hard and ridged, more fit for hedges
If more than trunk, not by a curious marriage
Disarmed of spikes, lopped and tamed in an orchard
To bear this wealth of delicate boughs cascading,
Flounced pink, downed gold, devoured by parasites
Strange to his grain's potential, fostered disapproving.

Crest lithe and light, the weather's dancer
But for the bitter moods for ever rising
From his dark roots and the dank clay beneath;
Fearing each leaf-fall, fruit-fall, yearly diminished
Not for his sake, to swell the festering humus
That breeds and buries, feeds and chokes unheeding.

Gardener indeed, who grafted quince on blackthorn,
Binding two kinds, two minds, by one sap mellowed,
Lifelong divided, indivisible lifelong in labour
For fruit not like the sun's gold or his aborted berries
Gratuitous, never learned the art of undoing,
From wounded fibre exacts the blossom whole!

Trunk hard and ridged, more fit for hedges
But for this wealth, her delicate boughs cascading
From his dark roots and the dank clay beneath;
By dint of wealth, downed gold by one sap mellowed,
Grown more than trunk or his aborted berries:
Crest lithe and light, the weather's dancer.

Security

1

So he's got there at last, been received as a partner –
In a firm going bankrupt;
Found the right place (walled garden), arranged for
a mortgage –
But they're pulling the house down
To make room for traffic.

Worse winds are rising. He takes out new policies
For his furniture, for his life,
At a higher premium
Against more limited risks.

2

Who can face the winds, till the panes crack in their
frames?
And if a man faced them, what in the end could he do
But look for shelter like all the rest?
The winds too are afraid, and blow from fear.

3

I hear my children at play
And recall that one branch of the elm-tree looks dead;
Also that twenty years ago now I could have been
parchment
Cured and stretched for a lampshade,
Who now have children, a lampshade
And the fear of those winds.

I saw off the elm-tree branch
To find that the wood was sound;
Mend the fences yet again,
Knowing they'll keep out no one,
Let alone the winds.
For still my children play,
And shall tomorrow, if the weather holds.

Errors

A short-wave station gabbles and hums –
The newly filled tea pot.
Turtle doves coo in the corner –
Something vibrates as I type.
Outside, a mechanical saw –
Guinea fowl screeching.
A pheasant's repeated hoot –
Cars on the new road.
I bend, and smell tom-cats –
Blackcurrant bushes;
Mimosa –
Meadowsweet.

I appoint my two eyes judge,
Sole upholders now of the decencies
Of reason, identity, place,
Yet from Thames to Riviera
Am wholly transported:
Meadowsweet to mimosa,
The blue-white-silver, yellow-tufted trees
On the mountainside
Long unvisited, never missed.
And the daily hill gone.

Old Poacher

Learned in woods
As troubador in words,
Delicate as a troubador's lady,
Killer of does grown doe-like
In nostril, ear,
Lithely, gravely he stalks
His quarry
That will never know death.
And men stalk him.

Only a hawk cries
Above the clearing;
Robin and blackbird are still.
It is the hawk will cry
Till his eye meets
The man's eye
And silent he dips over oak-tops
In flight that is not fear
But hunger's cunning.

Fearless, wily, the man
Listens:
For dog's pad on moss, dry leaves,
Brushed fern, torn bramble,
Panting breath, cough,
Squelch of boot in trough;
Or cropped grass,
Nibble on low hazel bough,
Scuttle of hoof, claw.

And feels again
The thorny joy
Of his great indifference:
To have almost forgotten death
In the woods, in hunger's
Mastery over fear;
With senses grown
Reliable, reliant,
And a man's mind
To savour the sense –
Hunting, hunted, both hawk and deer.

Omens

1

The year opens with frozen pipes,
Roads impassable, cars immovable,
Letter delivery slow;
But smallpox from Pakistan
Carried fast from Yorkshire to Surrey,
And no lack of news:
In the Andes a landslide
That buried a town;
In Dalmatia, earthquakes;
Bush fires around Melbourne,
Cooking wallabies, koala bears.
In the Congo, another rebellion;
In Algeria, random murders on either side;
Paris a playground for thugs.

2

The milk our children drink may or may not
be poisoned
By last year's fall-out, no longer part of the news.
Our earth may be shrinking, expanding
But was found to contain great cracks
That will doubtless widen even without our
help.

3

Amid such omens
How do we dare to live?
Brashly building, begetting

For a town besieged,
Crumbling, patched again, crumbling
And undermined?

4

Deeper I gulp cold air that not too suddenly kills,
Greedily drink with my eyes the winter sunshine
and clouds,
The old white horse in the meadow
Green again after snow.

Next year I shall see no meadow, no horse.

Anachronisms

From a London Sequence

I

Where the paint cracks, refracted in his gaze
A red geranium in a window box
Of any terrace house, means more than meadows;
A single flame kindled against the grime,
Element of his kind, means more than sunrise
Blazing as ever on bare indifferent hills.

A lighted window three rungs of rooftops higher,
London at dawn the broken man reflects,
A hint of summer frocks, brightness contained,
Soon to explode in sparks of multicolour
When, decomposed, housefronts assume their
numbers,
Daylight identity their scattering ghosts.

Time in the park, packed in the traffic's rumble,
Pattern of light and shade the tall trees make,
The dead friend met in the street, or nearly met
Where sharpest oddity has its duplicate –
Only what men have broken and men repaired,
Time, light and landscape mastered, he approves.

A red geranium against familiar grime,
At the grey moment that allows refraction,
Paint that was greener, and carnations, were they?
Gathered against the day, he turns, prepares.

II

In tube train, street
Through faces, voices he travels,
From smooth to rugged landmark,
The misty crag, the ditch-fed willow lost
In near or distant exile.
Sucked into eyes, explores
Glazed images:
A patio here with plants in ageless pots,
There, tanks over cobbles,
Tall houses shaken,
Clotted blood on tramlines.
In this watery blue
An English village,
Aerials on raw roofs;
Small monotone of bullfinch
On the hill stripped
Of orchards and elms.
That great moustache
Over tight lips
A laurel hedge imposed
On concrete fence posts, the new plot;
Beyond it, a gardenless row,
Back yards of stevedores, packers,
Coal fire abandoned one night
To smoulder on beneath the nightly cinders . . .

III

Jolted, he fumbles for his tie:
What street, what perished house am I?

What brawls, what yells engraved the scars
Deep in my hearing?

Horns of what obsolete cars
Driven towards what hollow rendez-vous?
What smells of refuse wafted through
My first awakenings?

Too many faces.
I cannot remember them all.
Too many voices.
I fall and fall.

IV

Roves again, and is held,
Pledged by one answering glance
To the man from Ghana
Adrift in Europe, his white stiff collar
Rimmed with London's grime,
Carrying pamphlets, and letters addressed
To the heads of churches and sects,
With a second class railway ticket
And not enough cash for a meal.
'A good will mission – you understand?'
Then laughs: 'And seeing the world'
(Shrunk, they taught him in Ghana,
To the dimensions of love).
Off to Paris, then Cyprus.
Meanwhile, what ought he to do?
Which way should he travel?
How send on his trunk?
What language, please, do they speak in Vienna?
And their religion? And that of the Yugoslavs?
What papers are read in England?
Should he write to The Times or The Daily Mirror?
And what should he look at in London? –
Well, what till now had he seen? –

A room in a lodging house
Open to coloured men,
A room shared with friends from Ghana.

On a mission,
Interdenominational –
'Inter-demoni-national', he seemed to pronounce it.
Seeing the world:
Bowler hats in London,
Eyes politely averted.
Railway officials in Paris
Not even polite
To strangers in dirty collars
With second class tickets,
No cash for tips or a meal.
Received by political prelates,
Dismissed with phrases, more letters
And the promise of grants –
The man from Ghana,
Pitting good will
Against perplexity,
Sowing the seeds of union:
Pamphlets, crumpled, damp
In the dustbins of Europe.

v

Horns of obsolete cars in a different country,
A city razed, rebuilt;
In half-sleep heard the incomprehensible din.
Across the yard, upstairs, the drunken lesbian
Was beating her meek wife.
Nightmare and day were one; drives to the hardware
shop,
Soft soap in barrels that smelled of despair.

And the bleakness of hardware was everywhere
Till I came to the lake, and the water dragged me in,
Dragged me down to drown like a pebble, glibly;
And was rescued in time, saved for the world of
hardware.

Who was that boy,
And who the man, the soldier
In a different country again,
Well fed, well house, well looked after among
the ruins
By a homeless man, Ukrainian, his batman briefly
In an idyll of mountains, forests and lakes
Where an Austrian ex-prisoner of war
Let his wife to a British cook for tins of American beef
And a homeless Yugoslav in his camp
Hired men with smuggled gold
To murder homeless Yugoslavs in their camps.

What self was that,
Riding a Cossack mare (requisitioned, her owner
machine-gunned
When we honoured our obligations
By sending his trainload of traitors across to the
Russian Zone)
Over ice, through knee-deep snow, in pine-needled air
Or on pine-needle track to the Alpine glades in summer?
Boats too we had, a boathouse by the lake,
And in I plunged again, though not to drown
But to kill time that was an interim
Between the death of one self and the next,
Between the end of one war – and the next?

VI

Heels click
Soles shuffle
Engines hum,
Brakes grind
Drills throb
A lorry rattles.
Eyes veiled with haste,
Low voices lost in the drone.

He walks.
He halts
And hears the silence of London
Built into walls,
The old and the new,
Buried beneath the humus,
Beneath the sycamore's roots.

Silence holds
The city together,
Absorbs the thrust
Of piston and wrist.

Clouds race over all,
Factory,
Terminal,
Park where the lovers lie,
Hospital ward
And black canal.

The sycamore's branches push
As though to crunch
Window panes,
Light bulbs.
Ivy winds
Towards the sycamore's trunk.

Vacant lot.
From the garden
Cry of a child at play.
The silence holds it,
Detains in remembered rooms
The friend long removed.

High noon.
Wind in the sycamore's leaves.
New faces, new voices,
Clouds that race over all.

VII

They come back to me now,
Each bungled death, half-death,
Each bungled love, half-love,
Each reawakening, rebirth,
And they who were part, are part
Of the one self, the many selves,
Of the one place, the many places,
The one time, the many times –
Are found again, and are lost,
Are not what they were, what I was,
And are all that I am.

Words

'A writer you call yourself? And sit there tongue-tied
While others talk about books?
Jolted, answer in monosyllables, non-committal at that.
Are you shy, then, or sly? Superior or plain dim-witted?
Do we bore you, or aren't you there?'

'A bit of all these. But words are the root of the trouble.
Because I can't speak – what I can't speak – I write.
Words? Yes, words. I can't do without them.
But I hate them as lovers hate them
When it's time for bodies to speak;
As an acrobat would,
Asked to tell how he leaps, why he leaps, when he's leaping.
A curious trade, I admit:
Turning a thing into words so that words will render the thing;
Setting a movement to words so that words will render the movement.
But words about words about things? I can do without them.
Look: the arc-lamp's game with the plane-tree's windblown branches.
Listen: an owl. And those voices – closing time down the street.
And smell: the coffee boiled over two minutes ago.'

Life and Art

For Denis Lowson

'A cell,' I reply when visitors remark
On the small high windows of the room I work in,
A room without a view. 'Exactly what I need,
Daylight enough – no more – to push a pen by,
And no distractions. Even the two great elms
With their congregations, race riots and social
conflicts,
Endless commotion of squirrels, jackdaws and owls
Not to be seen, and only seldom heard.'

You dropped in one morning and sketched the garden,
All blue and black with the bulk and shade of
those elms.
At once I longed to possess it. (The garden, the
sketch?)
And above my desk I pinned up the silence extracted
From the endless commotion of squirrels, jackdaws
and owls.
My garden hangs on the wall – and no distractions.

Because

To the child's 'why?' parents invent an answer,
To adult man's, scientist and philosopher
Their long cacophonous chorus of 'because'.
How mind abhors a circle! Let there be laws!
A schoolboy knows effects must have a cause.
All know it but the wise man and the dancer,
Tautologists who as they turn are still,
Find every virtue in a vicious circle –
The serpent's mouth that bites the serpent's tail –
And are because they are because they are.

Solidarity

There's honour among thieves, both in and out of prison,
Fellowship even, in the teeth of competition,
And sorority among whores – though mainly off-duty,
On sea-side vacations, or after the ruin of beauty –
But strongest and strangest of all is the solidarity
Of respectable men in respectable company.
Would it be drink that does it? Dissolving differences,
Discrete achievements and individual purities?
No, they feel it when sober, not only at parties and
luncheons,
But in boardrooms, common rooms, barracks, or
charging with truncheons.
It comes over them suddenly – not a warm, not a vernal
breath,
Yet kindling warmth in cold hearts – the bad conscience
of death,
Communist at the frontier bound in time to break
through,
But, teacher of love among convicts, Christian too.

After Attica

1

Rock, rock and the sea.
Fishermen mending their nets
In the shade of tall houses
Locked up when the captains died out,
Galaxidi fell silent,
The olive trade passed it by.

At Itea now
The great barrels are filled,
The ferries loaded with strangers.
And Itea's fishermen sit
In the shade of low hovels
Mending their nets.

2

Three vultures glide
Towards Parnassos
From the olive groves of Amphissa;
Over temple, theatre, stadium,
And the pine groves above.

The flycatcher flits
From fallen pediment
To mended pillar.
A long brown snake
Darts from loose rubble
To rooted thyme.
The holy site is a garden
For goldfinch, marigold, orchis.

Three vultures glide down
Over the valley
Where hooded crows
Perch on judas trees
To snatch the larger share.
Broken cry
Of a donkey laden with branches.
A shepherd stands in the glare,
Whistles to bell-wether, ewe,
And the lambs will follow.

Soon melted snow
Will replenish the little river
That now is an ochre track;
The swelling asphodel bulb
Will be celebrated
And, after fasting, the slaughtered lamb.
There will be dancing
To Giorgos the barber's guitar,
Neither child nor mule will be beaten
Till the women resume
Their digging, pruning, picking
That the ritual may be fulfilled.

The god who came from the sun
Has returned to the sun.
The prophetess is a cave.
The Castalian spring
Waters almond and fig tree.

The words to the song have changed.
This terrace carved out of rock
Bore a shrine, a villa, a pillbox:
Anemones bend in the breeze.
And three yellow vultures ride it
Back to the sea.

3

In halflight
Heavy with incense
Eyes blink
At unblinking eyes,
Black symmetry
Against a heaven of gold.
King's gown and shepherd's kirtle,
Green, red and blue
Pay homage to black.
Amplified in the domed silence
The humming of bees.

Scarred by earthquake, war,
Patched and impoverished
The forecourt collects
Larger quietness
Of mountains and valley.
Heavier than incense
The fragrance of blossoming laurel.
From a shallow basin's rim
Bees drink the cold spring water.
A monk on the balcony
Reads yesterday's paper.

DEMONSTRATION IN ATHENS—
Truncheon, tear gas turned
On women, old men.
Survivors perhaps,
Defenders once of these vineyards
When three hundred were rounded up,
Herded into the shambles
To pay for one soldier's death.

And now the tourists:
A café here, a shop,
Rugs from Aráchova,
Mementoes of places missed out
Or blankly visited,
Works of art – too many –
Conceived in the camera's womb,
Undeveloped, unborn.
Their guidebooks that leap
From Oedipus at the crossroads
To our holy Luke,
Neither mention nor name those others.

So we moved our ikons
To a homely chapel,
Left to them the basilica,
Open now, and empty
Till the next coach pulls up
With click of shutters, buzz
Not of bees, but voices
Complaining of roads and hotels.

Pray for them,
Pray for eyes that blink
At unblinking eyes,
Outgazed, like us all.
That ceiling too will go
Despite our propping, patching:
May there be eyes here to blink
At the sun
And be outgazed,
Hands to water lettuce,
To tend the bees.

The Road

It begins near Venice,
A Venice of chasms and pools,
And above a coastline longer than vision
Gently curves
Into a south or east without end.
Always the question is
How far can I walk it
Across what frontiers
Into what vastnesses,
More golden mist,
Woods ever denser, darker,
Mountains more mountainous
Above a more dazzling sea.

Always I am detained;
As by this new nation
Of displaced persons
Who are rarely visited,
Whose nationhood is a cause.
They needed me,
Appealed to my fellowship,
Involved me in schemes,
Charged me with missions
To friends whom I never reached.

If only I could move on
To the wilder, more alien countries
Further along the road.
I walk it often
In dreams
And do not look for it when awake.

Scenario

1

He came home. Came home? The house
Did not fit the garden, the view.
Their own, locked up in his absence?
Another she'd bought and unlocked?
On the floor of a half-lit room
Lay family silver, baskets full,
Tapestries, paintings he could not remember
possessing,
A screen of beaten brass,
Concertina of Indian dancers,
Flimsy, garish, in half-relief,
All dumped there to be discarded
Or, if he chose, kept to furnish the house.

2

Threading his way to the garden through
crowds of guests
He looked for his landmarks and frontiers:
To the north a great railway station
Linked to the house by a concrete road
That brought more guests in taxis.
To the south a valley and, hazily shining,
Cupolas, palace roofs, towers
Framed in mountain-tops, wooded ravines.

A woman stood near him, a stranger.
'Lend me your eyes,' he begged her, 'I mean,
Tell me, describe what *you* see.

My left eye fear, my right eye desire
Will not focus; all shifts and blurs.
Where am I?' She laughed, and moved on.

3

Room after room. Bare galleries, halls,
Passages, thronged with guests.
Unrecognized he explored them,
Came to an improvised kitchen
And found his wife with a man.
'Hallo', she said, and smoothed her lover's hair.

He turned on his heel, strode through the
staring crowds
And, alone in the garden, waited.
They followed: a burly man,
A fence between them. He vaulted,
The man seized his leg, pulled him down,
Hurled a knife, then a pitchfork,
But felled by his fists, lay still.

The single boom of a gong.

4

Longer than sight the table stretched,
Between bare walls without end,
Faces, faces, to each of which now with an effort
He could have attached a name, a function,
a place.
'So the three of you will be living together'
Neighed the sleek-haired one with a bow tie.
'It's hard enough to live with one's wife,
Let alone her lover' he heard himself answer.

A *bon mot*, apparently. Between their guffaws
He corrected himself: 'But no reflection
On *my* wife. A general observation.'
Had she heard him? He did not know where
she was.

5

He walked with her and their only child, a
daughter,
No house in sight, no intruder,
The three of them anywhere, walking in silence.
He turned to her: 'Is it true . . . ?'
Needing her confirmation of the silence
That made her true again, gathered into a
moment
Their moments and years.
'Quiet' she said, 'not now – the child'
And knifeblade, pitchfork when home,
Pierced him with love, the first and the last pain.

The Search

As commanded, I looked for my origin,
Passed through the town in which my grandfather
settled
And found no street that I knew;
On through the suburbs, blind bungalows,
Lilac, laburnum, narrowly flowering
And out into mountains, woods,
Far provinces, infinities of green.
Walked, walked, by day, by night,
Always sure of the route
Though the people grew foreign, bizarre;
And the birds, a species unheard of,
remembered me.
At last I came to a village
Where they told me: here you were born.
An unlikely place – no petrol pump, office block,
poster? –
Yet I could not deny it, and asked them the name:
Why, Mors, need we tell you, m o r s , MORS.

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